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Dollmaker, Inventory, Child

OREN LOVES THE SUPPLY CLOSET. He loves to go in and close the door behind him, to breathe deep the Christmas scent of adhesive, to run his fingers over the open boxes of Onyx micro-tips, G-2 refill cylinders, and unsharpened No. 2 pencils. He loves to choose these things and, finally, to steal.

He works in the corporate offices of a locally owned grocery chain, in center-store nonperishables. He started in ethnic, then moved over to bulk, and is now settled into a swivel chair in canned. He grew up with some of the owner's kids—lanky, buttermilk children with hair so fair it looks as though they've shaved their eyebrows off. The owners have big lakefront houses and buy their children boats for their birthdays. Their kids drive them in circles around the lake, other Hitler Youth—as their enviers call them—in tow.

A few years into his tenure at the grocery offices, they move into the top two stories of a new building—a clean place with hardwood floors and fresh flowers in the lobby. He likes the shiny confection of it. When his boss shows him the fully stocked supply closet, he inhales deeply, feeling relieved of some burden he hadn't known was there.

Before his near-decade-long stint at the grocery offices, he spent his time hopping trains and living in squats. During that era he watched people's faces go from pink to blue and brown to ash after too much heroin, witnessed a girl get raped by some tweaker crusties, had friends—road dogs, they called each other—who died in a squat fire in St. Louis days after he left.

These events didn't mean much to him at the time. If he felt anything, it was only second-hand irritation, convenient to pick at when he was bored. But when he found out his mother was sick during a rare call home, a vision of her, coiled and blue, surfaced and led long-neglected memories back into his mind, as though she were the engine of some morbid train. The open palm of a friend's severed arm, the burnt square stamp of the building his friends died in, the time a girl people called God lost her pointer finger after landing on it. That was the caboose—the memory of God's finger, bloodless and bent back at an irreverent

angle. He hopped an Arizona-bound train home, watching his freedom slip away on the tracks beneath him.

On his way home, riding slowly through Midwest ghettos, he watched young black men standing on stoops and street corners or walking languorously through the heavy summer air. What interested Oren was how impeccably clean they always looked, their long white shirts so fresh they must have been straight out of the package, their hats an array of bright colors, stiff and unwrinkled with stickers still attached, their hair in neat twists or shaved close. Traveling through Kansas City during a midsummer deluge, he saw some of these men take cover under a crumbling cornice and sheathe their shoes in plastic bags in order to keep them unblemished. He'd looked down at his own shoes then—decaying white Converse, he'd stolen from a store in Portland—and recognized for the first time that what he was doing—intentionally donning filthy clothes, going without showers and college education—was a privilege. He felt ashamed, scared that somehow those men would find out that he'd chosen poverty, that he could opt out at any time.

Back home he took a temporary position as a checker in a local grocery store. When something permanent opened up in the corporate offices, he applied and was quickly hired.

He is thirty now and can feel his momentum slowing, or speeding up, depending on how he looks at it. He doesn't begrudge himself the time he spent on freighters. He thinks there is value in the decisions he made, however naïve or privileged. If poor people had the choices he did, they too might decide it wasn't enough and go elsewhere, do otherwise.

Though he still filches more than he needs from the supply closet, he keeps an inventory of what he takes. Not to pay it back, just to account for it.

HIS ASSISTANT, FAUSTINA, knows he steals. She is a middle-aged single mom who insulates her sexless existence with the curled, yellowing pages of arts and crafts magazines and makes miniatures in her spare time. She is currently building the produce section of a little grocery store, and during her lunches sits at her desk crafting doll-sized fruits and vegetables. She has given Oren one of the oranges. It is half the size of his pinkie nail, painted a spectrum of sunset shades and covered in tiny dots meant to be the fruit's pores. He envies her—not necessarily the specific skill, but her ability to create a world, even if she will never fit into it.

Faustina never says anything about his theft. When she saw him loading printer ink into his car one day last summer, she just smiled and waved.

Maybe she feels sorry for him. He half wants to ask her to craft a miniature thief, a shoplifter, and put him in her store. He wouldn't be masked or anything like that, just a plain man in a button-down, with a kid in tow—the possession of children seems to allow people their innocence, or at least the presumption of it.

One day he tells her without prompting that he is keeping track of what he takes.

“Oh,” she says, “so you can repay it later?”

He lies, says yes.

HE LIVES ALONE in a one-bedroom, an elective bachelor, between walls thin enough to hear his neighbors sneeze. The neighbor to his south, an overweight, middle-aged man with long hair, keeps his TV on all the time. Always the low-register drone of programming interspersed with the shout of advertisements. His neighbor to the north is female and often on the phone, yelling and crying.

“Yeah, I read it!” she yells one night. “Why do you think we’re having this conversation? Russian roulette was how he put it. Said that past forty, it was *Russian roulette*.”

He often thinks about who he was before his mother's illness; how it woke him up, at least partially, to the existence of other people. He is unaware of any current shortcomings and fears that if no more cataclysms befall him he will remain unimproved upon. Can he outpace the next tempest, do its job before it comes? Stave off not catastrophe, but routine life? He begins to try.

In a Vipassana meditation class populated mostly by middle-aged white women, he learns to scan his body from crown to soles, noticing any sensation or feeling as he goes. Not judging, just becoming aware—that is the point, they say. This exercise seems an intuitive first step into the self-made territory of betterment. What, during his nightly scans, can he detect? Where does he tighten? Arouse? Flinch?

He is also fond of sleeping with women he has no emotional ties to, even if he has neither the looks nor charm to engage in it as often as he likes. There are enough insecure women to prevent sexual boredom. When he comes home one night after fucking a local barista, and finds in the flaccid center of him a deep blank, a snowy sensation in his scrotum, he decides: here is a place to begin.

He springs himself from meditation not long after, having recalled an anthologized poem he thinks might be instructive. He walks, bare and

heavy-footed, down the stairs from his loft bed to his bookshelf to scan the spines for the title he is thinking of. He is not really a reader, but when he buys books or is gifted them he keeps them, thinking them a necessary accessory in an adult's home.

The anthology is huge, its spine hard to miss—one of those tomes with Bible-thin parchment pages—but the poem is not lost in them. He draws his finger down the table of contents and finds it quickly, the only title with “sex” in it. Sounding almost envious, the poet wonders how the bleak and biological copulation of people who have sex without love can lead to climax, how the body can so wildly depart from the soul. Oren is surprised to find that she does not condemn these lovers, instead lauding them for their purity and pursuit of truth. He smiles to himself, thinking he's found another of the many paths. *There are many paths up the mountain*, the meditation instructor has said. And here is one.

It is at work he has the idea. He does inventory every year, already, to tally up how much he's stolen. It's as though he's been working his way up to this, to an inventory of women. In a way, then, the decision to take the inventory is not an epiphany, nor a revelation or apocalypse. It just comes, like a birthday.

He decides that he will need to designate some time to focus on this. It can't trickle out but should instead come all at once. “Ejaculatory” seems an appropriate way to describe it. He puts the request in for time off, and because he is a diligent worker, the time is quickly granted.

FAUSTINA HAS LEFT a few RFQs on his desk, with a sticky note on top explaining that she has taken the day off for her son's birthday. The note has a sepia-tone picture of a blowsy woman in a flowered hat, alongside some threadbare quote.

Before he begins work he goes to the bathroom. There is a man at one of the urinals, and Oren enters a stall and bides his time there, waiting for the man to leave. He is shy about shitting near others.

When he returns to his cube, Ariel from organics is sitting on his desk, looking through his things.

“Hey,” she says when he rounds the corner, “not one for decorating, are you? You need a woman's touch.”

He tries to sit down, but her heels are on his chair and when she sees he's moving toward it, she pulls it away from him.

“Is that a new tattoo?” he says.

“Heard you were leaving us,” she says.

“Yeah. Going on a little vacay. What’s the tattoo supposed to be?”

“It’s ‘supposed’ to be all the reasons I’m alive. There’re scales on there ‘cause I’m a Libra, mushrooms, religious iconography.”

She is running her index finger along the inside of a mauve pot of lip balm, a store sample, no doubt. There is a counter that fills, then empties, then fills again with a tide of vendor products: face wash, vegan marshmallows, beef jerky, local honey, Nair, etc. The market is the moon.

“You’re alive because of scales and mushrooms?”

She sighs. “And what are you alive for? Love?” She smirks at him, then says, “Just thought I’d come by and help you stock up for your trip.” She gestures toward some things she’s placed neatly on his desk—razors, a recyclable toothbrush, and some natural spermicide.

“Who are those for?”

“You, dickhead.”

She walks away, the fabric of her nylons making a sound like sandpaper rubbing against itself.

He thinks about their dalliances, pulls his memory over them like a hand. He liked Ariel. He likes her. When he recently cornered her in the stairwell, she told him she was in an LTR—a long-term relationship, she translated.

He looks at the things Ariel left on his desk, the sad remnants of some dead ocean: the wood-handled razors, the toothbrush’s ineffectual bristles, the spermicide’s slick and misleading femininity. He resents this morbid collection, the way it sneers at him a message of her desire for something he never had to give in the first place.

He can hear her talking to someone a few cubes over. Because he doesn’t want to chance another encounter, he goes to the supply closet, where he imagines relief. Once inside, he runs his eyes over the white rectangle ends of boxes, over legal pads and desk calendars. The calendars half worthless, it already being May. There are highlighters in pink, standard yellow, blue, green. Pen nibs range from thick and ink-sodden to metal points. There is a section for adhesive tags, used to mark document sections of import.

He opens a box of unsharpened Ticonderoga No. 2 pencils and runs the tip of his index finger over their ends, feeling the slight change in texture from graphite core to cheap wood grain. He rests his other hand on the shelf, a cool coil of rusty chain under his palm. He can smell it, the scent of the ground after rain, repulsive canyon must. The train is moving faster than usual. Flying over the crusted ball of mineral earth, stateless.

When it stops briefly that night, Oren finds himself host to a pungent mix of emotions: disorientation, fatigue, horniness. Two young men he sort of knows have befriended a teenage stowaway from Zacatecas, who was separated from her parents somewhere past Tyler, Texas. They share their malt liquor with her, the American one teaching her a Marines song he learned in grade school. *From the halls of Montezuma / to the shores of Tripoli / We fight our country's battles / in the air, on land, and sea.* The other man is from Australia and uses this to try and bond with the girl: “Hey,” he says, patting his chest, “me immigrant, too.” He’s been huffing spray paint, and the area around his mouth is blackened like a muzzle.

Oren spends the night drinking malt liquor, his back against the rattling boxcar wall, his gaze mostly down. He can feel something building, the barometric pressure changing. He tries to tell himself it’s only atmospheric, the fault perhaps, of a gathering thunderstorm. The next day, when he is hung over and fragile, the men take the girl out of the train while it’s fueling, keeping things friendly and jokey—*Montezuma, ha ha*—until the American grabs her waist and begins pumping his crotch against her back. Her body tenses and ducks, and the men straighten and hunch over her in response. Oren worries for his safety and returns to the boxcar.

“Think that Abo got tired of our singing,” the Aussie grins at Oren when he returns, his teeth straight and bone-white as dentures. The American doesn’t say anything but falls into a deep sleep out of which he snores and farts. The girl does not come back.

Oren, lost in the memory of this experience, has been rubbing the pad of his thumb over the rusted chain. When a temp he doesn’t know comes into the supply closet, he is shaken back into the present and walks to his desk with his thumb under his nose, the smell of rust indelible on his finger.

THAT NIGHT HE GOES into his kitchen and sets the day’s singular piece of mail—something from a monastery addressed to the apartment’s previous tenant—on the counter. He has been receiving these letters for a while now, always accompanied by a plastic coin the size of a half dollar, gilded in cheap gold paint and burdened by the outline of angels. He has about twenty of them in a little tower on top of his refrigerator. Whenever he tries to throw them out, he imagines them in the middle of some garbage heap, deprived of oxygen by the tons of refuse on top of them, never allowed to decay.

He opens the letter, detaches the coin, and places it atop the tower before sitting down at his kitchen table. He has a view from there of the apartment's yard, and he falls into a daze, his eyes blurring, his mind slowing.

The world of train-hopping squatters is surprisingly small. Once you're in it, you become part of a kind of analog Internet, receiving information and updates from afar. From this network he has learned that the American rapist has become what people call a "Christ-y"—a play on "crusty," which is what punks call each other. The American, who people call "Marines" found Jesus and quit using heroin. Now his tattoos are quotes from scripture.

They have a website, the Christ-ies, and Oren visits it sometimes out of boredom or nostalgia. On his last visit, there was notice of an event—a wake for Marines who had relapsed on heroin and died.

He wonders if Marines ever tried to make amends for the rape. Wonders if he ever thought about it, if it concerned him or played any part in his conversion. It is easier to think it hadn't.

The sound of his neighbor returning home rouses him from the table. He hears her throw down her keys, move to the window, and open it. He hears her exhaling, smells the cigarette smoke. He remains attentive until she closes her window, which she does with such ferocity that the tower of coins finally collapses. He bends his body in half, moving quickly along the waxy floor to collect them.

THE DOCTOR'S OFFICE is buried like a parasite in the basement of a medical complex. In a darkened room the pale doctor looks first at Oren, and then his mother, before telling them that she has multiple sclerosis.

"Your immune system turns on you," the doctor says, tapping an illustration, "attacking the tissue that surrounds the nerve fibers, as well as the fibers themselves."

His mother bows her head to the floor, murmuring. Oren stares at the illustration, an ominous-looking thing—the myelin broken up into even segments, like the train cars he rode long ago, their substance torn by the attacking immune system, left looking like decaying boxes no longer used for transport.

Before entering the offices, his mother insisted that they pray over one another in the car.

She always wanted to pray for the same thing on these visits—acceptance of her diagnosis, mutable as that was. This bothers him. She should pray for better, more conclusive results; more skilled interpreters of her

symptoms; healing, for God's sake.

"Maybe you should stop asking for acceptance of all these false diagnoses," Oren says once they are back in the car. "A year ago they said it was something else completely."

He watches a crow peck at a fast food wrapper.

"I'm not even sure the doctor knows your name," he says.

"Oh, what does it matter that he knows my name, sweetie?"

This infuriates him—her almost violent selflessness.

"How can you not think it important that the person making proclamations about your life know your name? Take some ownership over your life, Mom."

She takes a deep breath, and Oren watches millions of dust spores enter her mouth.

"You're sweet," she says, smiling and looking off into the parking lot.

THE DAY BEFORE HE LEAVES, he eats lunch with Faustina in the break room. As her Smart Ones meal makes its last rotations in the microwave, he tells her what he'll be doing.

"I'm going to take inventory," he says.

"Like from the supply closet?" she whispers.

"Actually, no." He hesitates a bit here, unsure of the level of detail he should go into.

"I got this impulse," he says. "This feeling that surfaced that I should get out of town and do some accounting of, uh, all the women I've been with."

She seems unsurprised, a bit wearied.

"Huh," she says. "And will you show it to anyone?"

"No. I think I'll probably burn it when I'm done. But I want to try and remember as much detail as possible for each one—their names, of course, their general dispositions. But really, it's not for them."

The microwave beeps and she gets up to claim her lunch.

"You know what happened to me today?" she says when she sits back down.

"What?"

"I was at the optometrist to pick up a new pair of glasses, and when I tried them on I was sure they were crooked—one lens was slightly higher than the other. I told the optometrist, and he didn't see it. It bugged me, because I could see clearly that they were off. I thought maybe he was trying to scam me, just being lazy or something. But then he took

a really close look, took the glasses off, fiddled with them, everything. And when I put them back on and they were still crooked, he told me it wasn't the glasses, it was my eyes—one was higher than the other. He wasn't mean about it. I took the glasses off and looked really closely in the mirror at myself and eventually saw that he was right."

"Really? One of your eyes is higher than the other? I've never noticed."

He takes a bite of his Clif bar. It is too sweet, but it is all he brought for lunch. He thought perhaps Faustina would offer to take him out to eat—sometimes she did that—but she hadn't.

"That reminds me of the absolute mirror," he says. "I don't know how, but instead of showing you a backward image of yourself, it shows you how you really look. When they debuted it at some museum or something, a lot of people cried when they saw how they really looked—it was so different than what they had thought."

Before he leaves work that day, Oren takes a look at Faustina's store miniature. She's almost done with it, just adding the last details, making tiny magazines and little packets of gum for the impulse-buy sections.

ON THE DRIVE OUT OF TOWN the air is lazy, thick with heat. He has begun having short, mundane premonitions in his dreams: groups of tiny frogs that appear next to a pond the following day, running into an old classmate, and today, a homemade advertisement for a taxi that reads "Wear-U-Want-2Go." If there are eternal things, then there is the quotidian, too. He takes the dreams as a sign that he is nearing the place where the two meet.

The land, once he gets out of Tempe, smells of copper. He rolls down his window, and the heat comes in like a curse. He tries not to resist. He passes a magpie. In his rearview mirror he watches the bird look up and then fly away, its long tail like an omen against the placid sky.

He swerves purposelessly west, then east on the road, cracking sunflower shells between his teeth, sucking their salt before spitting them lazily out the window, leaving a trail of saliva and shell from the driver's window to the tail. He drives over dead snakes, engraved into the road by travelers before him. He is already bored by his task.